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## **The hidden tactile negotiation sign language in Somaliland's livestock markets**

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-171294>

Journal Article

Published Version



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Originally published at:

Musa, Ahmed M; Schwere, Raphael (2019). The hidden tactile negotiation sign language in Somaliland's livestock markets. *Bildhaan. An International Journal of Somali Studies*, 18:50-69.



# Bildhaan

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AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF SOMALI STUDIES

Volume 18, 2018

# BILDHAAN

## An International Journal of Somali Studies

*Volume 18 2018*

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# The Hidden Tactile Negotiation Sign Language in Somaliland's Livestock Markets

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Ahmed M. Musa and Raphael Schwere

## I. Introduction

Price negotiations in the livestock marketplaces in Somaliland are not carried out openly. An exclusive circle of initiated and highly skilled market insiders, the brokers, representing sellers and buyers, use a tactile sign language to bargain. And, additionally, these negotiators cover their signing hands with a shawl (*cumaamad* in Somali) in order to hide the haggling from the curious glances of the bystanders. The brokers, however, only strictly censor price figures, while they orally and loudly substantiate their tactile signed offers by pinpointing the qualities of the animal or herd under consideration.

This tactile hidden negotiation in the Somali livestock trade was mentioned in a poem by Ismaaciil Mire, a well-known Somali poet who lived in Togdheer region somewhere between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ismaaciil, criticized the practice and the dealings and norms in the marketplace generally. He believed the livestock broker who sold his livestock cheated him. Interestingly, until today criticism did not fall silent. And, the contestation of the practice is not directed to this particular way of negotiating exclusively. Some behaviours in Somaliland's livestock markets (*seylado*) are perceived as anti-norm. Also, newcomers are excluded from the activities and are left in limbo and darkness concerning the procedures in the trade.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **A. Silent Trade Practices.**

Detailed descriptions of the hidden tactile price negotiation sign language in the Somali livestock markets are scarce. However, there is a body of literature about similar phenomena on the African continent and the Arabian Peninsula. In this literature, silent or 'dumb' barter trade, is described abundantly.<sup>1</sup> A good number of historians and anthropologists (cf. the lists of important primary and secondary sources, including Herodotus, Ibn Battuta, Grierson, Polanyi, etc., in Bonner 2010) observed silent economic exchanges. For example, in pre-colonial West Africa, foreign traders started barter with locals by depositing goods at a specific place and then retreated and waited for the latter to put down their articles, which they deemed of appropriate value, next to the items for exchange. Then the residents retreated, and the foreigners revisited the barter place and either left it with the offered goods or retreated again and waited for the locals to reconsider their offer and top-up their deposition (Fage and Tordoff 2013, 46). This kind of barter between groups with no shared language proceeded without personal contact or oral communication, let alone direct price negotiation by other means such as sign language. Importantly for our case, this forum of exchange excluded rival traders from offering their bid.

Moreover, academics expressed considerable doubt that this practice was actually performed in exactly this completely non-verbal way (Sundström 1974, 30–31). They remarked "that the concept of 'silent trade' can apply to a spectrum of transactions" (including different ways of encounters and modes of non-verbal communication) and that most likely often some kind of "local brokerage" was involved (Fage and Tordoff 2013, 46; Hopkins 2014, 67; Bonner 2010, 37). Besides the element of lack of transparency of the barter for competing market participants, these rather vague and questionable accounts of the pre-colonial West African silent trade, are not very helpful for understanding the Somali hidden tactile negotiation sign language. In the latter case, the negotiating parties share a common language and hail from the same cultural background.

## B. Negotiating With Sign Language.

Bonner (2010) described a case study of the pre-Islamic Arabian way of wrapping up a deal without verbal negotiation. This kind of silent trade is in its procedure and geographically and (perhaps) culturally much closer to our case of the Somali hidden tactile sign language negotiation. About one kind of pre-Islamic silent trade, he writes:

In pre-Islamic Arabia, as reported in the tradition on the markets, one method of concluding a sale was to do it non-verbally, with gestures, murmuring, and touching, perhaps using a system of sign language of which we have no further record. ‘Touching,’ *mulāmasa*, here meant touching the other person’s arm or tugging at his clothing, and did not mean touching the object of sale. After the coming of Islam, there was a recollection that *mulāmasa* used to involve a mutual touching of the parties during their negotiations. Soon, however, the original context—the silence imposed on these transactions—became obscure, and all that remained was a memory of the gesture of touching. (Bonner 2010, 32)

This corresponds to our case in various ways. Firstly, price negotiation is non-verbal. Secondly, traders have developed an elaborate sign language for the sole and particular purpose of non-verbally negotiating prices. Thirdly, the sign language, unlike deaf sign language, does not function based on visual but on tactile codes—similar to deaf-blind sign language. Fourthly, this tactile negotiation language was used despite the fact that “in Arabia most market-goers spoke Arabic, and for those who did not, some sort of lingua franca must have been available” (Bonner 2010, 37). Thus, it was not a necessity because there was no shared language between the negotiating partners. Fifthly, the consequence of using this mode of negotiation excludes competitors from offering their bid on the basis of knowledge of the price range negotiated in. However, what is different from our case is: Bonner assumes that the “markets of the Arabs” were silent places, while Somaliland’s livestock markets, the *seylado*, are not (as will be described in detail below). Secondly, Bonner did not indicate that the tactile negotiation was hidden, for example with a shawl covering the negotiating hands as in our case. Hence, interestingly, the similarities of Bonner’s reconstructions from his primary text sources and our contemporary anthropological observations prevail. And, historically, Bonner’s description might even offer a potential clue to reach at an explanatory hypothesis

about the origin of the Somali hidden tactile negotiation: it could possibly date back to pre-Islamic trade networks between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa (Bonner 2010, 47). But that is an assumption for others to test. Our goal is to describe, contextualize, and develop an understanding for the reasons this kind of negotiation practice is so solidly embedded in Somaliland's livestock trade in the past and today.

### **C. Accounts of the Somali 'finger' Negotiation Practice.**

As we mentioned above, very little has been written about the Somali hidden and tactile livestock negotiation practice. However, there are numerous publications, academic and non-academic, about Somali livestock markets that offer a macro-perspective. These publications (e.g. Ciabarri 2010; Samatar, Salisbury, and Bascom 1988; Mugunieri et al. 2008) describe the functioning of the market generally, in institutional, economic and also political terms, but mostly do not delve into the market microcosm of norms and practices. The 'finger' negotiation practice is mentioned, for example by Adam Ahmed Hussein, in his article about the marketing of Somali livestock, as a "'private treaty' haggling between buyers and sellers" (Adam Ahmed Hussein 2016, 141), but not described in detail.

Other three examples of literature that contain slightly more detailed accounts describe the practice in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> and early and late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Richard Burton, the British explorer, described the practice, as observed in Saylac in 1854, as follows:

The citizens have learned the Asiatic art of bargaining under a cloth. Both parties sit opposite each other, holding hands: if the little finger for instance be clasped, it means 6, 60, or 600 dollars, according to the value of the article for sale; if the ring finger, 7, 70, or 700, and so on. (Burton 1894, 87)

Interestingly, he calls it the "Asiatic art of bargaining"—maybe he refers to the above described ancient Arabian practices. Also, he was probably the first to describe the tactile codes in detail in English language. Unlike today, he mentioned that the traders were seated.

Lorenz Hagenbeck, a German animal trader and zoo director, describes in his autobiography the practice of Somalis in Djibouti in January 1906. Hagenbeck placed an order for 1000 dromedaries

which he had to supply “at top speed” to the German government for their “defence forces in South-West Africa.” (Hagenbeck 1956, 65) He described the trade as follows, emphasising the insider-outsider aspect of the practice:

I could have been of no use in dromedary buying, for I had not mastered the secret finger-language used in that trade. The following was the procedure. Hersy Egeh and the seller took each other’s hands and covered them with a cloth. Thus they literally got into a huddle and, unseen by any of the dromedary salesmen clustering round them, bargained away unhindered to determine both fair price and Hersy’s share in it. It was all done by a complicated system of finger pressure, and there was only one man working with Carl Hagenbeck of Hamburg who knew all the tricks of the East African dromedary trade, and that was Hersy Egeh. (Hagenbeck 1956, 69)

The historian Charles Gesheker, in this article about “Anti-Colonialism and Class Formation” in “The Eastern Horn of Africa before 1950” briefly described how the *dilaalin* actually grab their fingers:

Among the Somalis, the procedures for exchanging animals involved an intricate bargaining process that sometimes was hidden (literally and figuratively) from nomadic producers. [...] To commence the exchange, the *dilaals* [italics in original] would grasp hands under a small cloth and conduct a series of offers and counter-offers involving the assignment of monetary values to each digit. The top digit equalled 100, the middle one 200, and the third digit was worth 300. The prices were established by alternatively grasping each other’s digits until an agreement was reached and the two brokers then shook hands. (Gesheker 1985, 21–22)

#### D. Knowledge Gap.

This literature review yields two results. Firstly, the existing ‘silent trade’ conceptualizations are not fruitfully applicable to the Somali hidden tactile negotiation sign language practice. Secondly, there is a gap in the literature about Somali livestock trade when it comes to in-depth studies of the microcosm of the *seylada*, with its own norms and practices. For this reason, this article aims to fill this gap by ethnographically describing and anthropologically interpreting the complex system of norms and skilled practices, adopting a micro-perspective lens. Additionally, our goal is also to contribute to the quite active



current scholarly debate on the Somali livestock sector, by providing a contemporary account of how the practice is embedded in the livestock marketplaces.

### III. Methodology

The empirical data on which this analysis is based was gathered within the framework of two PhD research projects. Ahmed examines the post-war livestock economy in Somaliland. Raphael's research project investigates the transformation of human-camel relations and the accompanying changes of the skills of camel experts.

We separately conducted ethnographic observations and interviews in three livestock markets, in Burco, Hargeysa and Wajaale, between August 2016 and August 2018, and pooled our datasets after a joint research stay, again in Burco in Eastern Somaliland's Toghdeer region from the end of July until early August 2018. Observations and informal interviews were carried out from early morning until noon, the active hours of the market. More structured interviews were conducted after the *Asr* prayers in the late afternoon.

### IV. The Ecology of Somaliland's Urban Livestock Markets

The hidden tactile price negotiation is only practiced in the one institution of Somaliland's livestock market, the livestock marketplace called *seylada* (singular of *seylado*). Marketplaces are spatially delineated places within which a number of social actors engage in various kinds of interactions and are connected by different relationships; all orchestrated by timeframes, practical routines or procedures, norms, rules and regulations (cf. definition of marketplace in Bestor 2001, 9227–28). In the following, the *seylada* will be described as a microcosm of complexly interwoven spatio-temporal, social, and normative dimensions that surround the skilled negotiation practice.

#### A. The Spatial, Temporal, and Social Contours of Seylada.

Livestock markets are publicly accessible areas that are partly fenced (brick-built, ironsheeted, or prickly shrub fences; they make herding of the animals easier), dusty open-air spaces. Within the boundaries of the marketplace, there are three (not physically) zoned areas for different animals and markets: the shoats (sheep and goats) for export (area

name: *ahmin*), the shoats for the local meat market (*dabaxaad*, which is organized by women) and the camels (*geel*). Located in the periphery of these zones are the tea shops and kiosks where the market people take a rest, drink tea, or eat breakfast in the shadow, sheltered from sun, wind and dust. Apart from these simply constructed shacks, the inanimate inventory further consists of shade-giving roofs (hosting the shoats for local meat production market; laterally open), sand heap or concrete loading ramps (*digo*), loading and unloading animal transport lorries and passenger taxis or tuk-tuks, and Landcruisers of wealthier traders. All three *seylado* look more or less the same, only differing in their sizes and specialization on different animals. Also, we assume their appearance did not change much over time.

The marketplace is brought to life in the early morning around five when the tea shops start preparing breakfast for the arriving traders, brokers, and workers, while the first flocks of animals arrive by foot or lorry. Then, camels and small ruminants are traded in Burco and Hargeysa until noon, while cattle trading starts in Wajaale at 5:00 a.m. and usually ends already before 9:00 a.m. The *seylado* are busy marketplaces in the morning and then turn into football fields in the afternoon. All the markets are open every day, including the local official holiday Friday. Seasonally, the trade volumes change; the buzzing season peaks during *Arafa*, the *Hajj* season.<sup>2</sup> Other factors that influence the trade volume are droughts and import bans, such as the dire period during and after the last drought in 2017 or Saudi import ban periods.<sup>3</sup>

There are around 26 different types of actors. Among them, the highly experienced traders and brokers (*dilaalin*; presented below) stand in the centre of all activities in the marketplaces. The traders (mainly in the export value chain) can be divided into *jeeble*, *faashle* and *shirkad*.<sup>4</sup> The *shirkad* (Arabic, literally 'company') are the traders who work for exporters (to Saudi Arabia, specifically). The *jeeble* are traders who collect livestock from the rural areas (directly from livestock owners or from so-called bush-markets) and sell it on to the *shirkad*. The group of traders called *faashle* gathers and buys livestock brought to the marketplace directly by producers and sell it on to the *shirkad* for profit. Corresponding to these three types of traders, there are three types of brokers, the *jeeble* broker, the *faashle* broker, and the *shirkad* broker. The *shirkad* trader usually has a permanent broker, while the *jeeble* and *faashle* employ brokers ad-hoc. Furthermore, there is permanent staff of the big export companies like counters and accountants,

and a large group of ad-hoc employed labourers. These are porters who help load and unload animals from and to lorries, herders who group, regroup and keep together groups of animals that the brokers negotiate about, and herders who drive the animals from nearby *xerooyin* (singular *xero*, kraals) where they are fed and kept overnight when they are not sold immediately. There are also men who mark the sold animals with the new owner's (*shirkad*) sign with paint, lorry drivers, tea shop and kiosk operators, employees of the municipality who collect the taxes (per head), and, of course, pastoralists (livestock producers) who bring their own animals directly or come to choose some for rearing purposes. The non-human population of the marketplaces consists of cattle, sheep, goats, camels.

## B. The Dilaal.

The *dilaal*, the broker, mediates all the transactions and no transaction is conducted without him or her. Thus, the brokers constitute an exclusive group of initiated and experienced individuals that specialize on one specific set of marketplace tasks only. Female brokers can only be found in the market section for the trade of animals for local meat production. The *dilaalin* are employed by the aforementioned traders or by the livestock producers directly. They are, as mentioned, the only actors who engage, commissioned by the seller or buyer respectively (the seller and buyer mostly neither meet nor know of each other), in the price negotiation—for which they use the hidden tactile sign language. The seller and buyer usually select their brokers that are members of their own kin group.

There are brokers of all Somali kinship categories, from as far as Ogaden, South- and Central-Somalia, represented in the marketplace, especially in the market in Burco. There are market segregations; the brokers of the different kin groups gather in different corners of the market, depending on the direction from where the transporters, producers, and traders of their kin enter the *seylada*. For example, in Hargeisa, the east is dominated by *Habaryonis*, the south by *Edagale*, and in the west by *Sa'ad Muse*. In Burco, the *Habarjeclo* and members of kinship groups from South- and Central-Somalia dominate the north-east. Alternatively, the *Habaryonis* and *Ogaden* are located in the south. However, in terms of access, there are no restrictions. Anyone can enter and try making an effort to earn a living.

*Dilaalin* are mostly men in their middle ages and usually hail from rural areas and pastoral lifestyles before they migrated to the livestock market towns. Or they previously worked in the local meat business. Senior *dilaalin* have double roles; they also work as *wakiil* (agents) for the *jeeble* of their kin.

During the market hours, they appear as rough-looking men with rugged clothes. Many wear a *macawis* (wrap skirt) and sandals. Their accessories include a *cimaadmad* (turban) and/or a *shaal* (shawl), one of which they use to cover up the negotiating hands; a *budh* (club) or *bakoorad* (walking stick), which they use to keep the livestock together and sometimes to defend themselves in the case of a conflict; some put on *koofiyad* (prayer cap) to protect themselves from the sun and also to look trustworthy; a small notebook and a pen to record their deals; and most of them wear a (vintage) CASIO digital watch with a steel bracelet.

Their habitus, both physical look and behaviour, changes completely when they leave the market. In the afternoon, they put on closed shoes and clean clothes, move with notebooks and pen and start doing the *xisaab* (math) after *Asr* prayers (that is, after they take a rest between the midday *Dhur* and the mid-afternoon *Asr* prayers). Doing the math means collecting money from buyers (the traders, local meat production business people, and pastoralists replenishing their herds with *dhaqmaad*<sup>5</sup> animals), deducting fees and expenditures, delivering the money to the respective seller broker, and paying the seller (traders or local pastoralists).

The broker himself calculates his share, which is based on a per-head remuneration (0.4-0.5 USD per head of goat or sheep; 10-20 USD per camel; received from either the buyer or seller depending on his role as buyer or seller broker). Broker assistants receive the *qorax joog* (literally: standing under the sun) fee, a kind of a tip from the buyer for the efforts in the morning (lump sum of 3-5 USD, depending on the number of traded camels). Further cuts that are made from either the buyer's or seller's capital are the debts owed to service providers. These are the livestock transporters (lorries or human trekkers), the herders that keep and feed the arriving animals outside town before they are taken to the market and sold, porters in the market who help with unloading from lorries, and the herders within the marketplace that keep the flocks of sheep and goats together. The latter receive the so-called *gees qaarac* (literally: hitting horns) fee from the seller. Lastly, the brokers also handle the tax payments to the municipality

that presides over the livestock market. Many of the seller traders do not return to the rural areas with cash but with consumer goods (sugar, rice, wheat flour, etc.) from the town's stores which they resell in villages. The brokers also have to clear these debts. All of these transactions are made in cash in the afternoon (no cash is brought to the market in the morning)<sup>6</sup>, dollars for *ahmin* and Somaliland shillings for *dabaxaad* livestock, and the brokers communicate with the debtors and creditors via mobile phones. Because the brokers do not have permanent offices, they conduct their afternoon tasks from backrooms of stores or hotel rooms (where the out-of-town traders lodge), where they comfortably sit on carpets, backs against big pillows, and sip tea. Others sit in places where they can chew *qat*, a mild stimulant narcotic, and smoke cigarettes. Among the countless phone calls are also inquiries from potential future clients from Somaliland, Puntland, Somalia, and Ethiopia,<sup>7</sup> who want to know about the state of the market, prices, and logistics in order to make informed economic decisions.

### C. Behaviours, Norms, and Anti-norms.

During the hectic morning hours of the marketplace, the employed labourers and herders carry out their duties loudly by singing work songs and shouting commands and hitting the animals with their sticks. The traders and brokers engage in constant chatter in order to receive market information. Although the brokers silence the figures, they argue loudly and quarrel to underpin their claims while negotiating.

The brokers behave aggressively. They threaten each other with their sticks, hurl slanders to each other (even to women, elderly, or religious men!), and shower abuses on men and animals around them. Some easily lose their temper while others at least act as if they are about to lose it in order to assure the opposing broker registers one's seriousness. The *Dilaalin* quarrel and fight about who got commissioned to sell or buy livestock for a trader and who can legitimately claim the commission fee.

This rough, noisy, and fast atmosphere infects everyone within the perimeter of the marketplace. In order to compete in this atmosphere, one has to adjust accordingly by acting aggressively. This behaviour side-lines elderly men, most women, and pious men and women, because they do not want to act according to this norm.

Apart from the generally high volume of oral communication of Somalilanders in public spaces, these behaviours in the market, like the quarrelling and insulting, distinctively go against common public etiquette of interaction. It is somehow an antithesis to the atmosphere and norms of behaviour outside the boundaries of the market. Outside of it, the culturally and religiously defined etiquette guiding interaction insists on respectfulness of the elderly and women and addressing somebody with flattering titles (*Hajji*<sup>8</sup>, brother, cousin, uncle, friend ...), and general kindness with a touch of humour.

Thus, the hidden livestock price negotiation, accompanied by the loud argument, stands exemplary for a body of transgressive behaviours that are embedded and exclusively tolerated within the market. The traits of this negotiation practice can be seen as central and hence representative for the dynamics of the market generally. These are typical for all the other market-specific modes of interaction and its subcultural etiquette—which is contrarian to the norms outside of the market. The market therefore constitutes an arena in which behaviours and social norms, anti-norms, prevail that are sanctioned elsewhere. The *seylado* are microcosms, in which a group of actors dominate the activities by exhibiting behaviours that are exclusively tolerated in their subculture. Here, no one is held accountable for slanders or verbal insults. Because this has become the norm, for outsiders to try to tame the marketplace people has proven fruitless (despite the outspoken criticism, see below). Thus, the market is a contact-zone that is reigned over by initiated and skilled insider actors who fiercely defend their norms and codes despite criticism of the outsiders and the general transformation of the livestock trade. After the lunch break, the brokers do not only appear with a different look but also a different behaviour. They break with their market habitus completely; they are relaxed and put on friendly faces.

#### **D. The Hidden Tactile Sign Language Price Negotiation.**

With the description of the context of the marketplace, the *seylada*, we move on to describe the actual practice that is the main purpose of the article.

When livestock arrives in the market, driven by herders or unloaded from trucks, brokers gather around the animals curiously. That is when they start assessing the worth of the animals. The quality assessment is standardized with a grading system. Due to this collating of ani-

mals into the grading system and the availability of the current market prices for each grade (due to market chatter), the attending brokers already share a similar asking price range.

When the first buyer broker approaches the seller broker, the onlookers curiously follow the argument between the negotiating parties. After a while, more and more are drawn to the site, and they gather around the livestock which is standing in the middle in a circle. The bystanders include lower-level brokers who also assist in keeping the livestock together and then claim a small reward for it. They mainly make claims on livestock owned and sold by a trader from their kin. Sometimes, there are spies of rival *shirkad* traders among the onlookers. Such is the scene in which the negotiating brokers hide the prices over which they haggle. After grabbing each other's right hand, they immediately cover them, from one's mid-underarm to the other's, with a piece of fabric, mostly turban or shawl cloths.

Once their hands are covered, the buyer broker makes his first offer. The figures are tacitly and tactually signed by swiftly and skilfully grabbing either a specific number of fingers, by pressing the knuckles or bending the distal phalanges of specific fingers. The offered price, thus, is signed digit by digit.

1. grabbing of index finger
2. grabbing of index finger and middle finger
3. grabbing of index finger, middle finger and ring finger
4. grabbing of index finger, middle finger, ring finger and little finger
5. grabbing all fingers
6. pressing the knuckle of the little finger
7. pressing knuckle of the ring finger
8. pressing knuckle of the middle finger
9. bending distal phalanges of the index finger to the inside
10. pressing knuckle of index finger

The initiated negotiating partners are both always aware in which price range they are negotiating, thus, there is no confusion about the numbers. That is also why there is no tactile sign to separate decimals (67.5 is signed as 675). The difference between the initial offers of the two sides amounts perhaps to a maximum 50 USD for camels and less than 10 USD for shoats.

While the brokers are signing figures, as mentioned above, they talk about the qualities of the animals loudly. For example, they praise a camel's constitution, highlight the thick layer of meat over the ribs, or the buyer broker might point out the less positive traits of the animal to lower the value. The conversation can be heated but also humorous—sometimes they both crack insider jokes. In this manner, the negotiation round is a quickly concluded process. The experienced brokers have developed their tactile sign language skills at the beginning of their career and master it to perfection. Weighing up and calculating offers is delegated to their hands and fingers as the receiving and sending entities of meaningful—in numeric and emotional terms—codes. Cogitating is embodied.

A broker who wants to express that he insists on a figure does this by not letting slip the other's hand—he fixates the figure he wants with a hard grip. It is not common that the negotiators agree in their first attempt, which takes an average of 30 seconds. So, they part and repeat the procedure again later, sometimes several times. When no deal is struck but they are still desperate to get one done, an *isku soo jiide* (a mediator broker) intervenes. He grabs the hand of the seller broker, covers their hands, and then tries to finish the deal for the unsuccessful buyer broker. But first, he is informed about the *shirkad* (buying) broker's offer, also via covered hands. Then, he, while hidden, grabs hands with the *jeeble* (seller) broker to find out how much his offer is. At that moment, he proposes a new price. If still no agreement could be reached, the livestock is moved from the area of the market where the *shirkad* (buying) broker makes his offers to another rival *shirkad* where the process starts afresh. In the whole undertaking, the bystanders, other brokers and professional outsiders, are never informed about the negotiated figures.

When two brokers finally agree on a figure, they confirm the deal with a hefty powerful handshake. Some seal and celebrate the deal with a hearty "*Bismillah*" (Arabic, in the name of God). After this, the livestock (in the case of shoats) is moved in line and counted, the *shirkad* broker and his assistants inspect all the bought animals again. In case they find ill ones, they remove them from the purchased flock and price them differently. The negotiated price always only concerns one animal representing a specific grade (for camels). Later, it is multiplied by the actually chosen number of animals. As an exception, the price negotiation over large numbers of export shoats (sold by a *jeeble* to a *shirkad* trader) is not based on individual heads but a whole herd,



despite the different qualities of animals in it. Lastly, the seller broker usually confirms the price with the seller, the previous owner, and then lets the buyer broker know about the final decision. The buyer brokers (especially the *shirkad*) are mostly equipped with the authority of their commissioners to act autonomously.

### **E. Rationales for Adherence to and Criticism of the Practice.**

A uniform and satisfactorily enlightening rationale for this practice is hard to come by. Various actors explain, defend, or criticise this at once ritualistic, theatrical, and hidden negotiation very differently. Additionally, it is a sensitive topic that few brokers like to discuss with outsiders openly. This is also due to the many critiques of the practice.

Most of the brokers claim that they adhere to the practice because it is *caado*, traditional custom. Asked about the consequence of the lack of transparency of prices, they argue that it is done in the best interest for the organization of the market and economic benefits for all its participants. Firstly, concerning the organisation of the market, it enables brokers to strike deals more quickly without interference from the bystanders who could, if not hidden and silent, make their bids as well. As a result, more bargains can be closed uninterrupted. Secondly, concerning the economic benefactors, they artlessly explain that the practice allows for different prices for animals of the same quality. Hence, both seller and buyer, or seller broker and buyer broker, can potentially gain a better profit than his competitors. Also, traders can re-sell animals immediately after purchase for a higher price to another bidder, without the latter knowing of the initial price. Lastly, the broker potentially profits from the higher total number sold, as he rakes in a per head commission fee.

Still, we believe that we do not yet fully understand all the effects of the practice for different actors. We assume that the censorship definitely disadvantages outsiders or non-initiated newcomers (e.g. pastoral livestock producers and new brokers) in the market, as they are not able to assess the animals' worth and thus cannot estimate the narrow price range within the experienced insider brokers negotiate. So, they are side-lined in a way or at least they risk selling below or buying above the insider prices. Thus, the hiding, the deliberate lack of transparency as a norm of the market, can be interpreted as a strategy for the brokers and their exclusive circle to protect their business and livelihoods.

One line of critique of the practice comes in the form of an accusation that the brokers are insincere or even blatant cheaters. As a matter of fact, they call them “thieves” and interpret the hidden negotiation as “robbery.” The oldest source of critique is contained in a poem composed by the renowned Somali poet, Ismaaciil Mire, and an acute admirer of camels. Mire was born in the second half of the 19th century and died in 1950. In that poem, titled ‘*Ooggii Horaynagu Keceen*’<sup>9</sup> (‘With the glow of dawn they came upon us’), he describes his background and his first visit to a livestock market, the one in Burco. There, he was caught off-guard by what he described as the “faithless” and “greedy” brokers. He did not understand their way of business and the money economy in general. Eventually, he left with a selling price, which he deemed unworthy. He was upset over the transaction conducted by the brokers.

Oh my wife, going back to my early ancestors  
They and I have never seen trade with money  
The men we are descended from used to have camels  
It was always my lot to get a share from the attacking campaigns  
Only once did I do something which my father did not do  
I took four nights to reach the village, which the camels were  
    loaded up for  
I reached the gate of Burco, I and my goods  
Immediately they approached as if they were ready for me  
With the glow of dawn they came upon us, the brokers of the  
    sheep and goats  
People whose good faith had been taken away gathered conspiratorially  
    against us  
I was astonished when they pressed the shoulders of the rams  
“It is that amount; no it isn’t” they argued bluntly  
The stubborn arguing disheartened me greatly  
The one with the twisted eye cheated me, the one whom I trusted  
They tried to console me with four shillings minus forty cents (4 annas)  
While I watched the hands with which I was bought  
The sheep and goats you are asking me about have fallen into  
    the hands of others  
Those whom I believe deserve to be hung from thorns by their  
    Achilles tendon  
That whip-like stick and the pieces of cloth they forgot near me  
Some men are more expert in process than me; ask them!  
(Ismaaciil Mire 2009, translated by Martin Orwin)

Confronted with these accusations, the brokers reply that they do not cheat because of the risk for their reputation. Buyer and seller might meet each other and find out that the amount that one received differs considerably from what the other one paid. Reputation and trust are the most important ingredients for a successful broker carrier, they say. Otherwise, no one would engage them anymore.

The second line of critique is religiously motivated. Some critics say that the practice is “against our religion” or “haram.” There are two points of criticism here. The first concerns the relationship between the sexes in the marketplace. It happens, albeit rarely, that a female and a male broker engage directly in negotiations with each other. Some people are indignant at seeing unrelated men and women exchange handshakes. That is why many female brokers conduct their negotiations with male brokers in “side meetings.” They move away from the crowd and negotiate orally but quietly so that nobody can hear the prices discussed.

The second point of criticism concerns transparency. Quranic verses and stories of the *Hadith* about this matter are interpreted as follows: “Business and work in general have to rest on ethical and moral foundations. The precondition for propagating and realizing this goal is transparency” (Ali and Al Owaihan 2008, 12). Interestingly, critics of trading practices that lack transparency already referred to silent negotiation practices, voiced in their concern in the early days of Islam. Bonner writes:

When Islam arrived, the memory of these old Arabian markets became negative and vague. For the disapproving Muslim jurists, the pre-Islamic marketplace provided the perfect example of *gharar*, the indeterminate or aleatory element that renders a transaction void and reprehensible. We can see now that the Muslim jurists were not being merely dogmatic and close-minded on this point. For trading in pre-Islamic Arabia did sometimes take place in conditions which resemble games of chance—conditions which were roundly condemned in the Quran and early Islam. (Bonner 2010, 46)

## V. Conclusion

In order to conceptually frame the hidden tactile livestock price negotiation practice, we would like to borrow from ‘classic’ conceptions in the sociology of markets. In this academic subfield, markets are arenas

of social interaction and considered central institutions of capitalist economies (Beckert 2009, 245). After the collapse of communism, markets have become places of coordination and exchange of complex capitalist economy (opposite planned economy) (Lie 1997, 341). For a long time, modern economists theorized on the basis of the assumption that economic actors in the markets act rationally, are self-centred, and base their decisions on a freely accessible corpus of information (Beckert 2009, 246; Granovetter 1985, 485). However, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new generation of sociologically trained economists questioned the basic premise of the rationality of economic actor's actions and the assumption of independence from local behaviours and institutions. This has created sustained debate between "formalists" and "substantivists" on the independence of markets from the sociocultural contexts and institutions (Geertz 1978, 28). The most important concept that emerged from the debate was the concept of "embeddedness" (Narotzky 2001, 4069). Embeddedness, inspired by Karl Polanyi, is based on the assumption that contextual behaviours and notions such as trust, and institutions influence and sustain local economies (Lie 1997, 349). In this conclusion, we will try to explain the phenomenon at hand by borrowing this embeddedness concept. It guided our analysis of the organization of Somaliland's livestock markets and the context specific practices and strategies employed by the market's actors.

Livestock trade in Somaliland started in the pre-colonial period, way back before the modern central state institutions were introduced. Since the pre-colonial period, the livestock traders invented and transferred indigenous knowledge from generation to generation. These skilled trade practices give livestock traders a competitive advantage, for example, by maintaining trade relationships over time and because of its neat and functional interconnection with all aspects of society. After the introduction of modern central state institutions, starting from the colonial administration, livestock trade was always conducted in the periphery and was largely governed by informal and indigenous practices and norms. Thus, analysing Somaliland's livestock trade organisation using a neoclassical lens may yield no substantial revelation. An analysis based on embeddedness of traditional practices however is likely to offer new discernments which can be useful in understanding post-war and developing economies.

The literature has provided an insight into the long history of a skilled practice and embodied cognition that in today's world might

seem outlandish and out-dated to many observers. The existing texts on silent trading and sign language negotiation show how these practices have and still do create connections and how they maintain the functionality of and social order in marketplaces—over time and against all odds, such as language barriers or socio-political and economic transformations of the market and its surroundings.

We argue that hidden tactile livestock price negotiation sign language is embedded in the marketplace. Firstly, we located the practice in the spatial and temporal contours of the *seylada*. Secondly, we tried to connect it to the main actors, who skillfully embodied their negotiation cognition, and the normative framework within which they interact. We acknowledged both the brokers' and critics' explanations for their reasons for adhering to their ways or for their disgruntlement respectively. This helped to illustrate how the practice is interlinked with social and cultural, including religious, dynamics in Somaliland. The fact that the practice survived for a long time and that it is negotiated over and again, as the history of criticism depicts, demonstrates the embeddedness of the practice in Somaliland's social fabric.<sup>10</sup> The practice is a ritual that carries cultural meaning and therefore is trusted, and the brokers are trustworthy cultural figures. Furthermore, the marketplace is politically embedded: on one hand, state bureaucratic interventions in the market are reduced to taxation only; on the other hand, it is strongly connected to the kinship system and the pastoral political economy. We assume that this political entanglement assures, as already mentioned above, the reproduction of this system. Lastly, the protection of a functioning system of organizing the market, is in the best interest of the whole society of Somaliland—considering that the export of livestock is one of the few sources of foreign currency of the country, and the domestic trade of animals is economically very important as well. However, we have to state that we cannot draw any conclusion about the question whether the market could be run more profitably without this practice.

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## Notes

1. Many people inhabiting today's globalized world have made similar experiences in their life when they encountered traders with whom no language is shared, and we therefore negotiate with hands or, often seen today, by typing offers and counter-offers into hand calculators or mobile phone displays.
2. Saudi importers buy millions of shoats in the *Hajj* season because each pilgrim should slaughter an animal on the *Hajj*. The slaughtered animals, however, are then often not

eaten in Saudi Arabia but are shipped out to poorer Muslim countries around the world after slaughtering.

3. Currently the import of camels from Somaliland into Saudi Arabia and Egypt are banned. These import bans are bypassed by exporting Somali livestock from the port in neighbouring Djibouti.

4. Generally, these marketplaces host two different value chains. The export and the local meat production trade. The actors in these two differ slightly.

5. Animals not for export or slaughter

6. Some local buyers use the mobile money system *Zaad* to pay parts of the agreed price as an advance to make transactions of large sums—these cannot be handled with the inflation plagued Somaliland shilling as the volume of cash bundles would be too big and heavy.

7. Livestock from all these regions are traded in Somaliland because of Somaliland's Berbera port's geostrategic position, only a few shipping hours away from the ultimate buyers in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, or Oman.

8. Title of a person who has done the *Hajj* to Mecca, sometimes just flatterig

9. Also known under the title '*Ibsi Lacageed*', which loosely translated means 'buying with cash.'

10. In the wider region, however, a co-existence of different price negotiation practices in Somali livestock markets can be observed. In the Somali-inhabited northeastern part of Ethiopia, for example, the hidden tactile price negotiation sign language was replaced by transparent practices, using boards listing current prices. We authors assume that in the process of regional integration, this non-synchronicity of trading practice will effect is more contestation in this regard as well.

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